

Growing Up Sri Lankan in Australia

Core of the Apple by Radhiya Fanham

It was 2007 and I was 7 years old in Year 2. My teacher, Ms. Bhuvu had just explained our new Unit of Inquiry (UOI) for the term and my peers and I were simply buzzing with excitement. To get to share our culture and heritage with our friends and classmates – and to find out more about where we came from, was definitely something to get excited about!

I'd gone home that night, sat with my parents, and had a long, detailed conversation with my parents about the country they came from, Sri Lanka, why they came, how they came, and general information of my country. It helped that my memories of our trip to Sri Lanka earlier that year were still fresh in my mind. With the added information and descriptions, my chest swelled with pride. Surely Sri Lanka was the most beautiful, exotic country in the world! I knew I would enjoy the following term very much.

The day of my presentation drew near and I was itching with enthusiasm and eagerness. For my presentation, I spoke passionately about the beauty and strike of Sri Lanka. I proudly showed off the hand-made teak-wood boat created by a simple beach-side vendor, and the delicate, hand-woven handbag I received as a gift. I even brought a tape of Sinhalese songs for the class to sample. When I pushed the tape into the recorder, I beamed at the remembrance of the meaning of the words and how much more beautiful the language sounded in song.

But after a couple of minutes of the sweet, foreign melody, the entire class burst out into hysterics. I was shocked. Stunned. Could they not hear the exotic wonder of the words? Over their laughter, I tried to explain the meaning of the song – to explain why the singer was so passionate – he was singing about his beloved Sri Lanka. But I would've rather explained to a stone wall. The class's loud, harsh, cold laugh stabbed me through the heart. My lively, happy face clouded over, and my mouth in a wide grin turned quickly into a tiny pursed knot. I felt glued to my spot – unable to rush and turn the tape off, unable to stand and cry, unable to move. By the time the teacher had calmed the class down, the words of the song rang in my ears:

"අපට පවා අප්පහිටියාගේ ගීතක් අප්පහිටියාගේ ගීතක්
අප්පහිටියාගේ ගීතක් අප්පහිටියාගේ ගීතක්, අප්පහිටියාගේ ගීතක්"

*"And the foreigners can't understand,
My beautiful country, Sri Lanka"*

Although my teacher loved my presentation, I was hurt. My happiness died out just like a blown light bulb. What had first lit me up with bright excitement, had then dulled into a dark pain. This was my first exposure to racism.

Over the course of the following weeks after my presentation, the kids in my class would laugh with scorn at my language and mutter mock words that no one could understand.

The years after that were better. I grew to love Sri Lanka and considered myself a true “Lankan”. I am a proud, patriotic supporter of the Sri Lankan cricket team. For as long as I can remember, I've always loved my culture and its traditions – the shimmering, beaded, embroidered, sequined outfits; the spicy, flavorsome, aromatic foods; the radiant, smiling faces of our Lankan crowd; the loud, happy gatherings; the beautiful beaches and lush greenery in Sri Lanka – everything! But of course, I've never forgotten that at the end of the day.

When someone asks me where I'm from, I say with pride that I am a Sri Lankan-Australian. When I'm in Sri Lanka, I'm constantly showing off my “Aussie accent” to my younger relatives – always acting like a posh Westerner. And despite my negative experience in Year 2, my love for who I am and where I come from, constantly increases.

I've never found language a major barrier for me. Luckily for me, I've been able to pick up Tamil, one of the two main languages spoken in Sri Lanka, and the language that my parents use to converse in. Only my older sister and I can understand most of the language, but neither of us can speak it. We can speak broken Tamil – but as all my family in Sri Lanka understands English, we can converse in Tanglish (Tamil-English).

As my grandmother always used to say, “Our culture is like an apple. Without the core, the apple can't grow – it wouldn't be able to develop and ripen and sweeten for us to enjoy. Like that, Sri Lanka is our core. We must always keep its values and traditions central in our lives – and base the growth and development of our 'apple' around those principles.”

Growing up as a Sri-Lankan Australian, though I've faced difficulties, and will most definitely face more in my years to come, I've learnt to love and appreciate both countries, with their culture and traditions, and their ways of life and living. And I know for sure that I will always remember that I am that “apple”.